DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 186 894 CS 205 522

AUTHOR Barabas, Christine
TITLE Idea Combining: Synthesizing Syntax and Meaning.
PUB DATE Mar 80
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference on College Composition and Communication (31st, Washington, DC, March 13-15, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cognitive Development; Educational Theories; *Sentence Combining; Syntax; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Heuristics

ABSTRACT

Concerns that sentence combining has become the sole means of instruction in some college composition courses, that students are inadvertently getting the view that writing is essentially a mechanical manipulation of parts strung together, and that writing research has reduced writing to architectural structuralism made up of prewriting, writing, and rewriting are addressed in this paper. It explains how an interest in finding interrelationships among various aspects of writing led to developing a theory of idea combining, predicated on the assumption that lying dormant in college students' minds are syntactic patterns that can be resuscitated as ideas are discovered. Several sample exercises using both heuristic and syntactic signals are suggested for students who have had experience with sentence combining to prompt them to generate multiple relationship ideas and for writing instructors who wish to expand the strategies of sentence combining to include other rhetorical considerations. (AEA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Christine Barabas
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Christine Barabas
George Williams College
Downers Grove, Il. 60515
CCCC March 1980
Washington, D. C.

ED186894

IDEA COMBINING: SYNTHESIZING SYNTAX AND MEANING

Knowing full well the fondness which sentence combining enthusiasts have for T-units, clauses per T-unit, and words per clause, and knowing, too, that many of you probably came to this session because you either were already converts or had a desire to be converted, it is not without some trepidation and paranoia that I prepared this talk and here stand before you, for fear, I suppose, that perhaps the researchers are right in their claim that syntactic maturity, which I take to mean syntactic complexity or flexibility, is indeed a sign or symptom of conceptual maturity and that, therefore, the quality of the ideas I am about to present can be assessed simply by analyzing and tabulating the number of my embeddings, be they subordination, coordination, cumulation, or whatever, and hence that there may be among you some compulsive mathematical wizards who, as I speak, are busily tallying my T's or, as recent research has indicated is a more reliable index of quality at the college level, my words per clause.

The point of that syntactic maze is simply this: that emphasis upon sentence structure alone will not necessarily clarify or generate ideas. Christensen, Moffett, Marzano and others have cautioned that while professional writing is characterized by syntactic dexterity, that same ability may produce in student writing wordiness, redundancy, jargon, and gobbledygook.

Nevertheless, the assumption that attention to syntax alone will somehow spawn thought has become more and more explicit in the research on sentence

CS205522

combining, as recent claims for its efficacy fall barely short of cries of eureka. What began as game-play for seventh graders, something fun to do, has today become serious business at all levels of English education (and, parenthetically, serious business in the publishing world. I would add, too, and not so facetiously, that it is probably only a matter of time before Milton-Bradley comes out with a computer game called Sentence Scrabble or perhaps The Bionic Sentence).

What Mellon in his study on sentence combining said should never be construed "in any way as instruction in composition" and what O'Hare in his study stressed should be viewed only as a complement to the study of rhetoric for the young writer has today become the sole means of instruction in some college composition courses.

In view of all the recent research indicating that improvement in syntactic maturity leads to an improvement in the overall quality of writing, I am not about to suggest that we abandon sentence combining practice entirely. Rather, I propose that we discover ways of expanding the principles and strategies of sentence combining to include, instead of exclude, other rhetorical considerations.

So long as we, as composition teachers, stress the <u>how</u> apart from the <u>what</u>, we may be confirming and perpetuating the very myth which too many of our students already have: that quantity means quality, and thus, that the longer and more convoluted the sentence, paragraph, and essay, the better.

Worse yet, we may be inadvertently giving them the view that writing is essentially a mechanical manipulation of parts strung together to achieve some coherent whole, a view caricatured by the fantastic language machine of the Laputian projectors in Book Three of Swift's <u>Gulliver's Travels</u>. There, as

you may recall, the students stand around a twenty foot square frame upon which are thousands of movable dies, each imprinted with a single word. As the students turn the contraption's handles, words appear in various combinations. Swift then, perhaps prophetically, describes a rather primitive form of sentence combining:

> Six hours a day the young students were employed in this labour, and the professor showed me several volumes in large folio already collected, of broken sentences which he intended to piece together and out of those rich materials to give the world a complete body arts and sciences. . . .

I doubt whether this is quite what Christensen had in mind when he said that solving the problem of how to say solves the problem of what to say, or that it is a just description of sentence combining, but it does illustrate the vacuity of trying to separate language from thought, structure from content, form from meaning.

My own speculative scheme--idea combining--is based upon the belief that at the college level we ought to be just as concerned with what the students say as with how they say it. I have read too many student themes whose only saving virtue was a blind, mechanical adherence to formula and pattern, all variations on how to say nothing in 500 words or less, all structure and no substance. While I am disturbed by what Christensen called the syntactic anemia of student writing, I am equally disturbed by its conceptual anemia.

In "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence" Christensen said that he wanted students to become sentence acrobats, "to dazzle by their syntactic dexterity." Such skill may indeed dazzle the reader and probably does deserve high scores for technical merit. But let us not forget that writing, particularly exposition, involves more than expression, more than mere execution of syntactic cartwheels; that its purpose is not to impress an audience with fancy footwork

but to inform and maybe even entertain a reader with engaging ideas.

Having thus far perhaps bedazzled you, let me pause here to provide those of you experiencing pangs of thesis withdrawal with at least a working definition of idea combining: Idea combining is a strategy which uses sentence combining techniques in conjunction with a heuristic to generate and develop an increasing complexity of both structure and idea. It is a way of synthesizing syntax and meaning in an effort to provide at the sentence/thesis level the link beteen thought and expression. It, in short, stresses the what and how simultaneously; it is a method of combining invention and syntax. Commercialized, it would probably be christened "inventax" or "synvention."

In practice, idea combining may take various forms, and toward the end this presentation I will illustrate a few of its potential uses. My main emphasis today, however, is upon the idea of idea combining rather than upon its structure, for I believe that given the general concept, its underlying premises and theoretical framework you may then discover for yourself its practical applications.

As I have already implied, the concept of idea combining evolved from a merge of my interests in both invention and sentence combining. Beyond those specific concerns, however, it grew out of a broader interest in finding interrelationships among the various aspects of writing, an interest bred by disillusionment with the type of structuralism which seems to be reducing writing to architecture.

Ever since our profession discovered that writing was a process which could be divided into sequential stages, such as the popular prewriting, writing, and rewriting, the tendency has been to further breakdown and isolate those stages into even more minute elements and particles. While

such whole-to-parts analysis and classification have imposed some clarity and order on the otherwise mysterious act of writing, it at the same time has created the illusion that writing is a linear process and that each stage or element is separate from and independent of the others.

As a consequence, not only our students but we ourselves have begun to think in terms of the units and chapters prescribed in our texts, typically: brainstorm, develop thesis, outline, write, and revise. In most composition textbooks, syntax, if it is treated at all, either is a tangential part of the revision process or is buried at the back in a separate Handbook section or, as has become more popular in recent texts, in a separate chapter on sentence combining. Either way, idea is at one end and syntax is at the other end. In practice, idea combining is a means of making the ends meet; in concept, it involves the perspective necessary to see the relationships among the parts which the linear/process model obscures.

In A Conceptual Theory of Rhetoric D'Angelo clearly and cogently provides a theoretical basis for such interrelationships. Based upon the premise that "thinking is structural," his final proposition that "conceptual patterns of sentences, conceptual patterns of extended discourse, and the topical patterns of discovery are all structurally related" has given composition a megastructure for synthesizing syntax, discourse, and invention. If these three, as he postualtes, are all symbolic manifestations of the same underlying thought processes, then it follows logically that we ought to be able to interchange and even combine their functions.

In terms of idea combining this means that heuristic patterns can serve a syntactic function, and syntactic patterns can serve a heuristic function. Or, put more simply, idea generates form, and form generates idea. To separate the

two--invention and syntax--however, is to create an artical barrier between thought and language, to segregate as separate processes what in actuality are interdependent parts of the same process. For, without an awareness of syntactic structures, one lacks a vehicle for verbally expressing thought; and conversely, without a thought to express, one lacks reason for using those syntactic structures. Both are necessary as each influences and determines the other.

Maybe this is what Christensen had in mind when he said we needed a theory of the sentence which would not only combine primer sentences but would also generate ideas. Thus far, however, that need has not been met by sentence combining, whether signalled or non-signalled. Even in the text/workbook based upon Christensen's own cumulative sentence combining, Bonniejean Christensen prefaces it by saying that of the three main divisions of rhetoric--invention, arrangement, and style (or, alternatively, discovery, organization, and expression)--the text's concern is with style or expression. Such emphasis upon structure, she maintains, may then lap over and become an aid and guide to both discovery and organization.

Unlike sentence combining, idea combining does not depend upon this eventual transference. What does not trail along behind how; the two are integral. The lapping of structure and discovery is immediate.

Finally, idea combining is predicated upon the assumption that lying dormant in the college students' minds are syntactic patterns which can be resuscitated as ideas are discovered. From what we know of language development, post-elementary students already have an understanding of sophisticated sentence structures. In the most recent study of sentence combining reported in last month's Research in the Teaching of English, Smith and Combs hypothesize

that sentence combining practice at the college level may not teach students "how to construct longer, more complex sentences. . . but rather that they should do so." Among their findings is evidence that students with no sentence combining practice improve their syntactic complexity merely by being told that "the reader would be a highly intelligent person who is influenced by long, complex sentence."

Of further interest, too, is that these students showed an average gain of 1.28 words per clause compared to the experimental group in the 1977 Morenberg et al. study who, after fifteen weeks of nothing but sentence combining, showed a gain of only .89 word per clause.

Having almost used up my allotted share of T-units and words per clause, and having focused thus far on simply the what of idea combining, I'll conclude with a few of the hows.

Both of the models I am about to present differ from sentence combining in a couple of significant ways. First, unlike sentence combining exercises in which all content is given and students have only to rearrange and combine the separate syntactic parts, idea combining exercises provide only partial content. Thus, whereas the emphasis of sentence combining is entirely upon the manipulation of structure (the How), the emphasis of idea combining is upon the generation of both structure and idea (the How and the What). Second, whereas sentence combining signals are only syntactic cues, idea combining signals are heuristic cues which, by virtue of their sequence within a given context, also, and simultaneously, serve a syntactic function.

In both of my models I have used the familiar journalistic five W's + How heuristic as the basic signalling device because it is easy to teach, remember, and use. Other heuristics, however, such as Burke's pentad and Pike, Becker, and Young's particle-wave-field, could be adapted to idea combining exercises.

The first model is really neither a pure form of sentence combining nor idea combining but rather a hybrid of the two. It is intended for those students who have had practice in sentence combining and who either are no longer finding it fun after several weeks or are ready to embed a few ideas of their own.

Model #1 Heuristic signals + connecting word signals

Example 1

Given: subject (who/what) and focus (what)

WHY (Because) _____ and WHY _____.

WHO/WHAT (subject) WHAT (focus)
our country ought to explore alternative sources of energy

HOW (by) _____.

Possible completion:

Because of the dangers and costs of nuclear power plants, our country ought to explore alternative sources of energy by investing federal money in research.

The first example provides a kernel sentence (or a nude thesis) with the heuristic WHO/WHAT (subject) and WHAT (focus) identified, plus other heuristic signals linked to connecting words (indicated in the parentheses below the blanks). Exercises such as these can be used as a transition from sentence combining to idea combining, for although a thesis is supplied, students must generate additional ideas both syntactically and conceptually related to each other and to the core context. Direction and discovery--what the students are given and what they must give--are balanced.

Exercises of this type can also be used as an effective anticote to the "flat" thesis statement. Too often composition texts (and teachers) treat the concept of thesis as nothing more than a matter of subject ≠ focus. Such an approach leads to both simple sentence structures and simple ideas. Furthermore, unless students can discover and verbalize at the sentence level the conceptual/contextual framework of a thesis--such as the idea's causes, consequences, restrictions, or qualifications--they may lack a clear means of developing that thesis. (E.g., the thesis, "My roommate is inconsiderate," while it contains the mandatory subject ≠ focus, does not anticipate whether what follows will be the how, when, where, why, etc.)

Whereas exercises like the first example emphasize thesis <u>expansion</u>, example #2 exercises emphasize thesis <u>generation</u> by providing students with only a partial thesis (minus the subject or focus), connecting word signals, and blank heuristic signals (i.e., unlinked to specific word signals).

<u>Model #1</u> Heuristic signals ≠ connecting word signals

<u>Example 2</u>

Given: List of signals followed by incomplete thesis

WHEN signals:	when, after, while, during, whenever, before
WHERE signals:	where, wherever, at, under, beside, near
WHY signals:	because, because of, since, due to
HOW signals:	by, through, with
QUALIFYING signals:	(of circumstance, condition): although, yet, unless, so long as, even though, as, only, to the extent that, if, despite, only
SPECIFYING signals:	who, which, that
CONTRAST signals:	compared to, while, although, contrary to, unlike, however, similar to, like, different from

CONTRAST WHEN WHAT (subject)

____ _____, jogging

WHEN WHAT (focus)

_____ is not only more/less _____

WHAT WHAT

but also more/less _____ and _____.

Possible completion:

Compared to jogging in the winter, jogging in the summer is not only more fun but also safer and healthier.

Prior to such exercises, students may be given a list of words and phrases commonly associated with each of the heuristic signals from which they can draw upon for possible completions.* Such a list, however, should not be presented as either exhaustive or prescriptive, since the aim of these type of exercises is to have students freely generate both the ideas and syntactic structures within the given context.

I should note here that although, in most composition texts, generation of thesis precedes expansion of thesis, I have reversed this order in my Model #1 examples because the later seems to me to be a lower level of abstraction and difficulty than the former, and because the order both between the examples of Model #1 and between Models #1 and #2 is based upon the principle of increasing completion through gradual deletion. That is to say, students must generate more and more as they are given less and less.

A logical extension of Model #1 is Model #2 which, using the barest of given content, best represents idea combining.

*I have included in that list and in the succeeding exercises, an additional three heuristic signals--those of qualification, specification, and contrast--because the journalistic heuristic does not account for these conceptual relationships.

Model #2 Blank heuristic signals

Example 1

WHAT (subject) QUALIFICATION

Writing _____

WHAT (focus) HOW HOW

_____

WHY

_____.

Possible completion:

Writing, although it may never become easy for most people, can become more purposeful if one first decides upon a specific purpose and audience, for these two are what really determines content and style.

Example 2

WHY WHY WHO/WHAT (subject)

_____

WHERE WHAT (focus) WHEN

[verb] expensive _____

Possible completion:

Because of inflation and declining enrollment, tuition at private colleges will be even more expensive this fall.

Here, both in terms of concept and structure, direction is minimal while discovery is maximal. Like Model #1, only the subject (Example #1) or focus (Example #2) is given. This core content triggers thought and, because it is only a fragment of an idea, stimulates a kind of conceptual clozure. That clozure, in turn, is effected by the type and sequence of the heuristic signals.

Unlike Model #1, Model #2 uses only blank signals. Generation of ideas is directed only insofar as a given heuristic signal inherently determines a basic type of conceptual relationship (i.e., WHY eliciting causal thought).

Without specific word cues linked to the heuristic signals, students may more freely discover and synthesize both idea and syntax. Furthermore, since the blank signals appear in combination, students are prompted to generate not just single but multiple-relationship ideas. Creating such relationships between thought and structure is not a matter of simply filling in the blanks or stringing together the parts to make a whole. Rather, the process involves a kind of holistic "networking" of the connections among the parts, connections at once semantic and syntactic.

These idea combining models attempt to elicit that complex process by which we create and express such connections. Neither the models nor the example exercises, however, are intended as rigid, pedagogical structures but rather as loose ideational constructs. The "givens" within each model can be varied, as well as the type, number, and combination of heuristic signals in the examples. Beyond Model #2 is the possibility of a Model #3 based upon only blank heuristic signals with no given content; and, beyond that, a "blank" Model #4 in which the students themselves generate a combination of heuristic signals, with or without a given core content.

If the models I have presented do nothing more than clarify the <u>what</u> of idea combining and stimulate other composition teachers to explore the <u>hows</u>, then they have served their purpose. For what we need are not ways of further isolating the elements of writing but more ways of synthesizing them.

To date, heuristics has been confined primarily to the study of invention, and syntax has been confined to the study of sentence structure. Writing, however, is not a matter of discovering an idea and then finding a form to express it in (or, conversely, finding an idea to fit a form). Nor is it a matter of word combining, sentence combining, or paragraph combining. It is idea combining, a synthesis of both syntax and meaning.

REFERENCES CITED

Christensen, Bonniejean. The Christensen Method: Text and Workbook. New York: Harper and Row, 1979.

Christensen, Francis. "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence." College Composition and Communication, 14 (Oct. 1963), 155-161.

Christensen, Francis. Notes Toward a New Rhetoric. New York: Harper and Row, 1967.

D'Angelo, Frank J. A Conceptual Theory of Rhetoric. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Winthrop Press, 1975.

Marzano, R. J. "The Sentence Combining Myth." English Journal, 56 (Feb. 1976), 57-59.

Mellon, John C. Transformational Sentence-combining. NCTE Research Report No. 10. Champaign, Ill.: NCTE, 1969.

Moffett, James. Teaching the Universe of Discourse. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1968.

Morenberg, M., Daiker, D., and Kerek, A. "Sentence Combining at the College Level: An Experimental Study." Research in the Teaching of English, 12 (Oct. 1978), 245-256.

O'Hare, Frank. Sentence-combining: Improving Student Writing without Formal Grammar Instruction. NCTE Research Report No. 15. Champaign, Ill.: NCTE, 1973.

Smith, William L. and Warren E. Combs. "The Effects of Overt and Covert Cues on Written Syntax." Research in the Teaching of English, 14 (Feb. 1980), 19-38.